Renee Good's Time at Old Dominion Included an Award-Winning Poem

"What I saw in her work was a writer that was trying to illuminate the lives of others," a faculty member recalled.

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Kent Wascom, director of the creative writing M.F.A. program at Old Dominion University, said he met Renee Good in the fall of 2019 when she took his fiction class because she wanted to experiment with a new form of expression.

While other young writers tended to write about themselves or what they knew, Ms. Good consistently sought to write beyond her own experience, he recalled in an interview on Thursday.

She wrote about elderly people, veterans and people from different places in other times. "What I saw in her work was a writer that was trying to illuminate the lives of others," he said.

That alone was remarkable, but even more so was the fact that she was completing her coursework while pregnant and working to support herself, he said. When the coronavirus pandemic shutdowns began in the spring of 2020 and lessons went remote, Ms. Good continued to show up for class and sought to make sure others did, too.

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"I very much remember her being someone who made others feel better in that moment," he said.

Ms. Good lived in Minneapolis. David Guttenfelder/The New York Times

Mr. Wascom said he coordinated with other professors to help ensure she could complete her degree as the end of her pregnancy coincided with the end of her semester. He fought back tears while remembering how Ms. Good later came into his office to thank him and introduce him to her new baby.

Ms. Good, 37, was killed by an ICE agent on Wednesday in Minneapolis. Federal officials, including President Trump, have defended the shooting as lawful, saying that the agent who fired had acted in self-defense. City and state officials called those accounts "propaganda" and "garbage."

In 2020, Ms. Good also won one of Old Dominion's most prestigious accolades, the Academy of American Poets Prize. The award program is administered by the Academy of American Poets, but every participating university or college conducts its own competition.

Rajiv Mohabir, a poetry professor at the University of Colorado Boulder, said he selected her poem when he served as a guest judge for Old Dominion. He remembered the poem, "On Learning to Dissect Fetal Pigs," stood out from the stack of about 20 submissions — the names of their authors all redacted — because of its tension between brutality and wonder. The poem contrasts the violent dissection of pigs in biology education with childhood understanding of faith and memory.

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Mr. Mohabir, a British immigrant with Guyanese parents, said he never had the chance to meet or interact with Ms. Good, as he was teaching in Boston then and the contest was held remotely that year. But he said he was struck by the poem's idea that "we have to kill something in order to know it," and since Ms. Good's killing, has been ruminating on its ending words:

"that the bible and qur'an and bhagavad gita are sliding long hairs behind my ear like mom used to & exhaling from their mouths *'make room for wonder'* —

all my understanding dribbles down the chin onto the chest & is summarized as:

life is merely

to ovum and sperm

and where those two meet

and how often and how well

and what dies there."

Jazmine Ulloa is a national reporter covering immigration for The Times.

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